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ABSTRACT

A case against using traditional orthography (T.O.) as a learning medium and in favor of using the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.) is presented. The following points were noted: (1) Most children are taught to read as we and our ancestors before us were by an alphabet which is at least 1,000 years old and took its form from the convenience and expediency of the writer rather than consideration for the learner. (2) We persist in using an out-of-date medium for learning because of man's innate conservatism and distrust of anything new. (3) Since many educational authorities accept the fact that i.t.a. cannot harm the child's ability to read eventually in T.O., it is not necessary to delay the use of an alphabet especially designed to make it easier for children to learn to read. (4) Even children with an inadequate linguistic background can learn to read in i.t.a. and thus add the benefit of print to the benefit of speech in developing their ability to understand and learn the English language. (5) Since the transition from i.t.a. to T.O. is made without difficulty, it is not necessary to review our present alphabet. It is only as a learning alphabet that it proves to be inadequate and detrimental to so many children in the initial stages of reading. Tables are included. (DH)

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AS DIFFICULT AS ABC

by Sir James Pitman KBE

The case against the traditional orthography as a learning *medium*

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How many characters to learn?

It is a mistake to suppose that there are more characters to be learned in an alphabet designed for easier learning than there are in our traditional orthography (T.O.).

Our traditional alphabet has not 26 but 66 characters, as follows:—

			b/f 39
A a ɑ	**3**	N n	**2**
B b ɓ	**3**	O	**1**
C	**1**	P ƥ	**2**
D d	**2**	Q q ɋ	**3**
E e ɛ	**3**	R r ɾ	**3**
F f ƒ ſ	**4**	S s	**2**
G g ɡ	**3**	T t ƫ	**3**
H h ɦ	**3**	U	**1**
I i ɪ ɟ	**4**	V ʋ	**2**
J j ʃ ʝ ɉ	**5**	W ɯ	**2**
K ƙ	**2**	X x	**2**
L l ʟ ɭ	**4**	Y ɣ	**2**
M m	**2**	Z ʒ	**2**
	c/f 39		**Total 66**

Additionally our traditional orthography employs digraphs (e.g. **th**) where the Initial teaching alphabet (i.t.a.) employs a single **ŧh**. If such characters are counted against the total of i.t.a. characters, then the corresponding digraphs of T.O. ought equally to be counted: and such digraphs are very common in our traditional orthography. Not only **th**, but also **ch, sh, wh,** etc.; also **ai, ay, au,** etc., etc. Not only **th** and **ai,** in **the** and **paid,** but also **TH, th,** etc., **AI, Ai, ai** and **ɑi,** etc. There can be no gainsaying that the learner of i.t.a. has *very* many fewer characters to learn —and of course only one value need be learned for each of those very many fewer characters.

AS DIFFICULT AS A B C

The case against the traditional orthography as a learning *medium*

YOU and I may be proud of ourselves. We learned to read! We must indeed be good, because we succeeded—and that notwithstanding a most difficult medium!

If we had considered the matter at all we would have realized that we were using that medium *only* because our teacher had been made to use it when he or she was a child, and his or her teacher had used it because his or her teacher had used it, and his or her . . . way back for 400, 500, even 600 years. One and all, at an age too early to consider what was happening, we were made to accept that mediaeval medium without question or even thought, as the best—and indeed as the only—possible medium from which reading could be learned.

My purpose is therefore to show how old (and how difficult) a learning medium has been perpetuated—and without thought or even question—and how explicable have been, now are, and will continue to be, the frustrations and the tears which accompany the learning of reading for the great majority of children—and the failures of so many others!

How old is our traditional orthography? Plates 1 and 2 will show you that—

1. Our upper-case alphabet is Roman and at least 2,000 years old;
2. Our lower-case alphabet is Roman and at least 1,000 years old;
3. Our mixture of both in the current convention is Roman and at least 1,000 years old.

Plate 3 (being in English and not Latin) will show you that the printing of English (and earlier its writing) has followed almost exactly that form of writing and printing which the mediaeval English scribes were already employing when writing or printing Latin. Such transfer of the alphabet of Latin to English seemed natural, even though it was fraught with future dangers of chaotic confusion for all who sought to learn to read.

The two alphabets we now use and the enormous variety in spelling our language with them are thus at least 1,000 years old, and were the

accident of their times, in which the habituated reader and writer substituted his own convenience for that of the learner, and in which expediency excluded thought and design altogether.

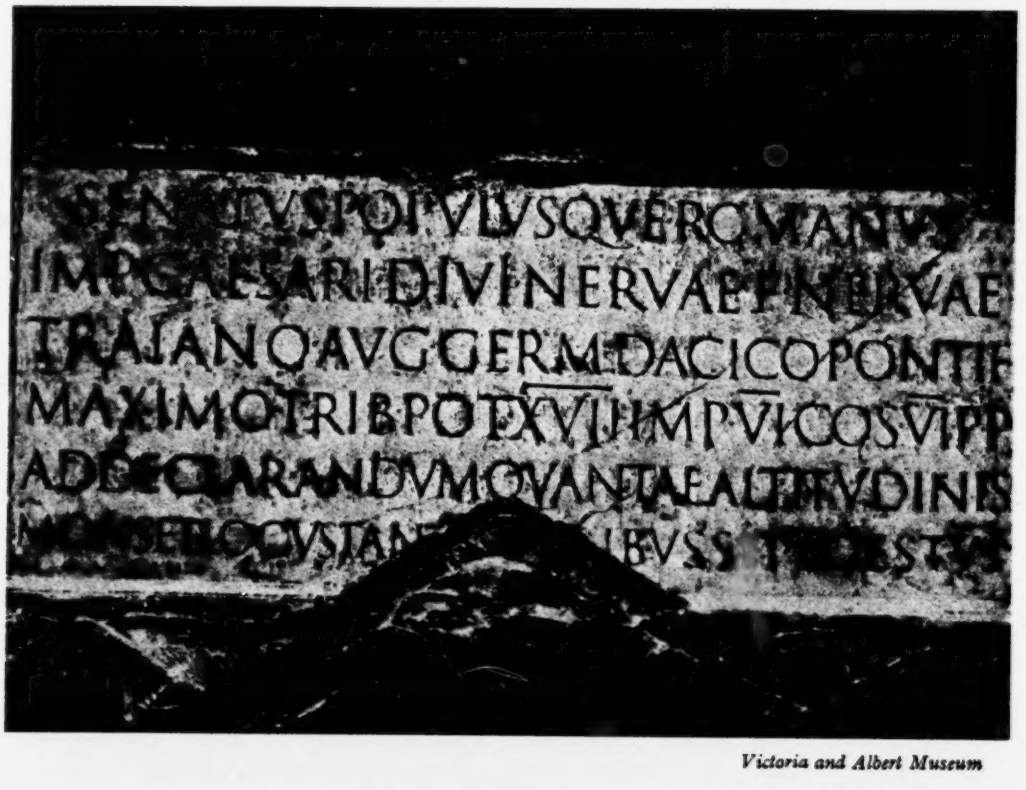
We know now that an alphabet specially designed can be *very* much easier to learn than has been our present haphazard learning tool—that "Easy as ABC" is indeed an attainable ideal—and so is "Reading without Tears." We know also that such an alphabet can be designed to depart so little from our present orthography, that anyone who knows English at all well is able to make the transition to our present alphabets and spelling in a simple process.

Thousands of learners have proved this ease of transition from i.t.a. to our traditional orthography (T.O.): hundreds and hundreds have proved the ease of transition the other way too, having already come to school with some knowledge of reading in T.O. **indeed, adults fiend it very eesy tω reed i.t.a. eeven with nœ introduc∫hon tω ƭhe twenty nue caracterz or ƭhe sound valuez ov ƭhe nue caracterz.**

Why then do we persist with an out-of-date *learning* medium? There are many reasons, all of them connected with man's innate conservatism and his distrust of anything new. We tend to forget how the first automobiles were not only mistrusted but loathed by the vast majority. We forget that surgeons resisted, many for up to fifty years, the life-saving discovery, by Joseph Lister, of the means of preventing so many deaths from post-operational gangrene. They went, without even washing their hands, from dressing the septic wounds of the patients of earlier operations to perform operations on the new intake.

Is it not an abuse of our power as adults, and unfair to young children, to refuse such educational progress? Was it fair to the patient on the operating table to have stubbornly continued in the practices of the Middle Ages, and, in preferring ancient ignorance, to have rejected knowledge discovered with the progress of science? Do we not owe it to the six million English-speaking small children who *every year* reach the age of going to school, to make school as easy, as happy, and as successful an experience as possible?

Of course if there were any possible danger of harm, a further period of caution and delay would be justifiable. But meanwhile all those who have studied the facts, and in particular those in authority such as the Minister of Education and Science, and Directors of Education of Local Education Authorities in Britain, not to mention also State and local School Superintendents in America, have already become convinced that children can come to no possible harm; and that all those who know English at all well in its spoken form will learn to read and



Victoria and Albert Museum

SENATVS·POPVLVSQVE·ROMANVS
IMP · CAESARI · DIVI · NERVAE · F · NERVAE
TRAIANO · AVG · GERM · DACICO · PONTIF
MAXIMO · TRIB · POT · XVII · IMP · VI · COS · VI · PP
AD · DECLARANDVM · QVANTAE · ALTITVDINIS
MONS · ET · LOCVS · TAN IBVS · SIT · EGESTVS
[TIS · OPER]

Plate 1. The Trajan Column in Rome (A.D. 113)

Note that the upper-case characters of this Latin inscription differ, if at all, only insignificantly from those upper-case characters used in children's text-books to-day. These characters are more than 2,000 years old, dating back much earlier than A.D. 113. Note that the language is not English.

to write in T.O. more successfully than in the past—that is to say more quickly, more certainly and more happily at school—and with other advantages too.

Those children with an inadequate linguistic background and who consequently make the transition—if at all—very slowly, are those who would fail anyhow. It is not sufficient to enable them to "read." Thanks to i.t.a. they have been enabled to master the *mechanics* of reading, but they no more than appear to be reading. Similarly in the auditory field they have mastered the mechanics of listening whilst they are giving no more than the appearance of effectively listening. In both cases such subnormally linguistic children are understanding neither what they hear nor what they read. Their knowledge of what words to expect next in any particular context is insufficient to enable them to read fluently even in i.t.a. because their understanding of the language is too little. Thus their linguistic ability is even more inadequate for the difficult task when they are faced with the far greater difficulties of T.O., which have thus been deliberately deferred until later: indeed, in the much more difficult traditional medium they find it very hard to detect the correct word and concept for what appears to them to say only *onky* (*once*) where they have been happily successful in reading *wuns*. After all, lack of rationality and of prior knowledge at one time prevented us from reading the words *Marjoribanks* and *Cholmondeley* correctly, and it is hardly surprising that children of poor linguistic ability should find comparably misleading—because irrational—print forms hard to read, when there is no help from the context either. However, granted such a "backward" child's ability even to read at all (thanks to this very much easier medium), and given the teacher's willingness to forgo a premature effort to "do the transition," the child may have the benefit of print added to the benefit of speech, in a fruitful combination, for developing his ability to understand messages and so to learn the English language. Thus the child may make good much of that earlier deprivation of opportunity, or at least of success in learning, in those earlier days when he was expected to learn, and was failing to learn, only one form of language.

How long do you, who were successful, believe it will take us in this twentieth century to accept and act upon the progress of modern discovery? How long will the alphabet and spellings, which even the printer William Caxton did not institute but of necessity inherited in 1477, survive as the main and sole medium for learning? For the sake of six million children *a year* let it be 50 months and not 50 years! Might your decision, your influence, your advocacy not help me (and also help many of those leading educationists who have already

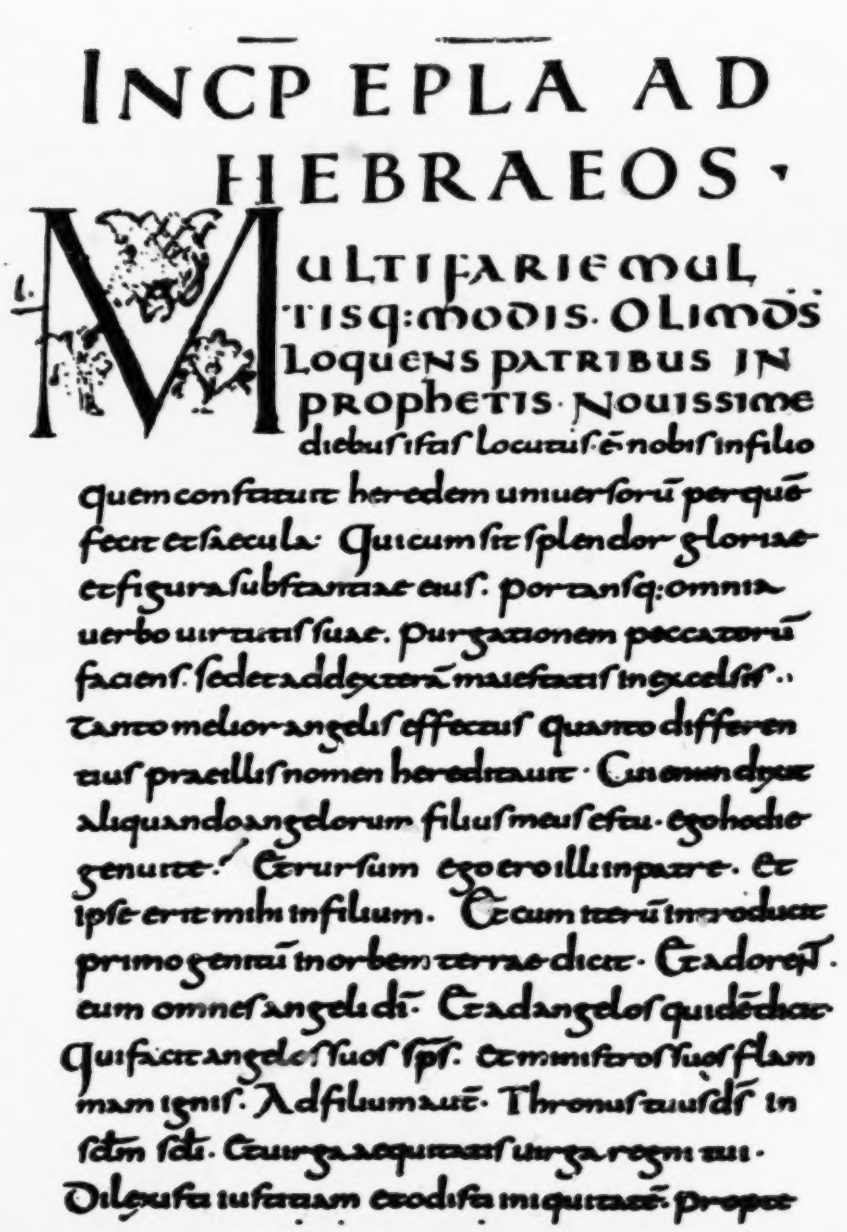

INCP EPLA AD
HEBRAEOS·
MULTIFARIE MUL
TISQ: MODIS· OLIM DS
LOQUENS PATRIBUS IN
PROPHETIS· NOUISSIME
diebus istis locutus est nobis in filio
quem constituit heredem universorum per quem
fecit et sæcula· Qui cum sit splendor gloriæ
et figura substantiæ eius· portansq: omnia
verbo virtutis suæ· purgationem peccatorum
faciens· sedet ad dexteram maiestatis in excelsis··
tanto melior angelis effectus quanto differen
tius præ illis nomen hereditauit· Cui enim dixit
aliquando angelorum· filius meus es tu· ego hodie
genui te· Et rursum ego ero illi in patrem· et
ipse erit mihi in filium· Et cum iterum introducit
primogenitum in orbem terræ dicit· Et adorent
eum omnes angeli dei· Et ad angelos quidem dicit
Qui facit angelos suos spiritus· et ministros suos flam
mam ignis· Ad filium autem· Thronus tuus deus in
sæculum sæculi· Et virga æquitatis virga regni tui·
Dilexisti iustitiam et odisti iniquitatem· propter

Plate 2. The opening page of the Epistle to the Hebrews.
Written by Alcuin of York: early ninth century
[Inc(i)p(it) Ep(isto)la ad Hebraeos]

Note both that the language is not English and that this example adds the later lower-case characters to the earlier upper-case characters, and moreover combines the two in our present convention. Note the opening upper-case characters in the two sentences in the third line from the bottom "A*d filium aut*(*em*). T*hronus tuus d*(*u*)*r*(*at*) [for ever and ever]." It is only in the abbreviations (which are an overlined kind of shorthand) and in the use of the long *ess* that these ancient characters, both upper-case and lower-case, differ at all significantly from those in a child's book of to-day.

accepted its inevitability) to hasten the day when T.O. will be abandoned as the initial medium for learning?

Since, then, the issue is the elimination of the ancient medium as a *learning* tool, "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly."

NOTE

So easy is the learner's transition from i.t.a. to Caxton's alphabet and spelling that there is no case for replacing Caxton's alphabet as a *using* alphabet. It is only as a *learning* alphabet that its anachronisms are so damaging. For instance, the child has no difficulty in transferring from **ſhe** to **t h e.** Moreover, even the contrast between **haull** and **ſhall** does not prevent him from accepting **hall** in T.O. (the same four final characters) for those two differing speech sounds.

After all, a Chinese has no difficulty in reading or writing *when once he has learned*—thereby proving that the benefit of the greatest of all man's inventions, the alphabet, lies in the superiority (for easier learning) of alphabetic writing over picture writing. That being so, it is only in the earliest stages of learning that the anachronisms of the English alphabet exert their harmful influence, and accordingly need to be eliminated.

THE HOLY GOSPEL OF IESVS CHRIST ACCORDING TO IOHN.

CHAP. I.

The Preface of the Euangelist, commending Christ (as being God the Sonne incarnate) to the Gentils, and setting out the blindnes of the Iewes in not receiuing him. 19 Then, the testimonie of Iohn Baptist, sent to the solemne legacie of the Iewes: as friendly, vpon his sight of IESVS come to him: 29 thirdly, to his owne Disciples also, putting them euer from him self to IESVS. 35 The made it plainer to them that he is Christ, 40 and so began he also to haue Disciples.

The 1 parte: THE ACTES of Christ before his manifestation, whiles Iohn Baptist was yet baptizing.

The Gospel at the third Masse vpō Christmas day. And euery day at the end of Masse.

IN THE beginning "vvas the WORD, 1
and the WORD vvas "vvith God, and
"God vvas the WORD. † This vvas in 2
the beginning vvith God. † Al things 3
vvere made "by him: and vvithout him
vvas made `nothing. That vvhich vvas
made', † in him vvas life, and the life vvas 4
the light of men: † and the light ſhineth in darkeneſſe, and 5
the darkeneſſe did not comprehend it. † There vvas a man 6
ſent from God, vvhoſe name vvas Iohn. † This man came 7
for teſtimonie: to giue teſtimonie of the light, that al might
belecue through him. † He vvas not the light, but to giue 8
teſtimonie of the light. † It vvas the true light, vvhich ligh- 9
teneth euery man that commeth into this vvorld. † He vvas 10
in the vvorld, and the vvorld vvas made by him, and the
vvorld knevv him not. † He came into his ovvne, and his 11
ovvne receiued him not. † But as many as receiued him, "he 12
gaue them povver to be made the ſonnes of God, to thoſe
that belecue in his name. † Vvho, not of bloud, nor of the 13
vvil of fleſh, nor of the vvil of man, but of God are borne.

ET VERBVM CARO FACTVM EST.

† AND "THE VVORD VVAS MADE FLESH, 14
and dvvelt in vs (and vve ſavv the glorie of him, glorie as it
vvere of the only-begotten of the Father) ful of grace and
veritie.

Plate 3. The Rheims New Testament (A.D. 1582)

Note that this is English not Latin, and that the upper-case and lower-case alphabets, and the mixtures of them in the old convention, have been taken over from Latin to English. Note too the inference that scholars and scribes, who were used to writing Latin in the mixture of two Latin alphabets (which were alphabetically adequate for that language) and who needed increasingly to write in English, continued to use the Latin alphabets without fresh thought and to improvise spellings for the novel words of English—to the alphabetic needs of which the roman alphabet was not adequate.

Plate 4. Fifty words at random, being the words printed as column headings to the first five pages of the Book of Genesis in the (King James) Authorized Bible (A.D. 1611)

(See further caption on facing page)

The creation	of the world.
The creation of man.	The first Sabbath.
Mariage inſtituted.	The fall of man.
The promiſed ſeed.	Abel murthered.
The genealogie	of the Patriarchs, &c.
Methuſelah.	Noahs Arke.
Noah entreth	into the Arke.
The Arke reſteth.	Noah ſacrificeth.
The Rainbow.	Noahs generations.
The firſt Monarch.	Babel builded.

These printed forms have been photographically produced from an original copy in the British Museum.

Note the word *creation*. A writer habituated to writing Latin, and above all a printer furnished with type for the printing of Latin, faced a tricky problem in alphabeticizing a sound present in English but absent in Latin. Without a character to write or without a type to "set," improvisation became inevitable. Thus arose the use of *tee* both for the sound of *shuh* in *creation*, and also for the sound of *tuh* in *at*.

But why did this printer—indeed all earlier printers too, from Tyndale in 1534—here choose the Roman *tee* to represent this English sound? Because, of course, to do so was second nature to those who had written and printed Latin, in which the related word was *creatum*, not only so spelled but also so pronounced in Latin. But it did not stop there. Later the *oceans* were created. (Note, incidentally, the *tee* alphabetically used in the related word *created*.) Again in that word *ocean* there arose the need to improvise for the English sound: again the writer and printer went back to the Latin form *c* which, in i.t.a., is called a *kee*. Later the words *passion*, *machine* and *conscience* called yet again for improvisation, and once more the derivation from Latin determined yet different characterizations (i.e. *ss*, *ch* and *sci*) for that common English sound which is most typically represented in other words by *sh* (e.g. *bishop*: but beware—*mishap*).

There are to-day eleven spellings in which the characters *see*, *aith*, *tee*, *ess*, *kay* or *eks* are used either alone or in combination with other characters to represent that sound.

Equally there was no unambiguous character for the English sound *aim* in *creation*. Here again the fact that the Latin happened to have been *creatus* determined the use of that character in *creation*.

Notice the use of that same character also in *man*, *Sabbath*, *mariage*[1], *fall* and *Patriarch*. Elsewhere will be found the same character employed for a seventh and yet an eighth sound in *was* and *any*.

A variety of spellings for the same sound is fortunately more tolerable than this variety in sound for the same spelling. Whilst the child finds it particularly difficult to attribute eight different sound values to the character *a* (just as we should find it most difficult to attribute even two different numerical values to the figure 6), he finds it more tolerable to learn several spellings for the same sound. But even so, the variety of different spellings for the same sound—which incidentally gives rise to the different sound values for the same spelling—is too great to be easy for the child.

Meanwhile it is worth repeating that the character *at* (*a*) was used 400–500 years ago not only in 1. *creation*, 2. *man*, 3. *Sabbath*, 4. *mariage*, 5. *fall*, 6. *Patriarch*, but also in 7. *any* and 8. *was*: moreover that this character had, even as long ago as all that, its three forms A, a and ɑ.

Thus arose the fact that more than 2,000 different spellings are used where a mere 40, or even less, would have sufficed. If only at that time of the transition from the writing of Latin to the writing of English, maximum simplicity in learning had been considered—or even desired! If thought had only been taken then, millions of young children in the twentieth century could have been saved from failure and illiteracy. In default, it lies with you—and me—to give a new deal to the millions of the future.

[1] It is to be noted that *mariage* is spelled *marriage* later: similarly *murder* is later so spelled. In other seventeenth century Bibles *genealogy* and *ark* are so spelled. The selection of one spelling from a variety, sometimes even in the same verse, and the keeping to only that one, was a later development. By 1611, however, virtually all our present-day spellings were already habitual.

Plate 5. The developing course of spelling in the six earliest New Testaments in English for what is now a single common vowel sound

	Wycliffe 1380	Tyndale 1534	Cranmer 1539	Geneva 1557	Rheims 1582	Authorized 1611
æ						
a	( )	creacion	creacyon	creacion	creation	creation
a-e	take	take toke	take	take	take	take
ai	feith	fayth faithe faith	fayth	faith fayeth fayth	fayth faith	faith
ai-e	reyned	rayned	rayned	rayned	rained	rained
aigh	( )	strayght streyght	strayght strayt	strayght	straight	straight
a-ue	plague	plage	plage	plague plage	plague	plague
ay	day dai	daye	daye	day	day	day
aye	preiede preyed preied	prayed	prayed	prayed	prayed praied	prayed
ea	grete greet	great greate	great greate	great	great	great
e-e	there	there	there	there	there	there
ei	veil	vayle	vayle	vayle	vele	vaile
eig-e	regned	rayned	raygned	raigned	reigned	reigned
eigh	( )	wayght	wayght	waight	vveight	weight
ey	thei	they	they	they	they	they
eye	obeischid obeied	obeyed	obeyed	obeyed	obeied	obeyed

The development of a part of the English vocabulary and of its spellings in respect of one of the forty sounds of English is set out here. They are taken from Bibles ranging from the MS. Bible of Wycliffe of 1380 to the printed Bible of King James I in 1611. It will be noted that the words *creation*, *straight* and *weight* (the two last being of Middle English origin) were apparently not in Wycliffe's vocabulary. Later (Plate 6) it will be shown even more convincingly (even if it is not already sufficiently clear) that our present-day spellings were forged during a period 500–600 years ago, and that they have remained virtually unchanged ever since from the form in which they emerged, and in which the world's best seller (The Authorized Bible) not only popularized them but invested them with the apparent sanctity of Holy Writ.

Plate 6. The spellings of the 50 commonest words, as found in the six earliest New Testaments

For note to this plate see page 12

	Wycliffe 1380	Tyndale 1534	Cranmer 1539	Geneva 1557	Rheims 1582	Authorized 1611
the	the	the	the	the	the	the
of	of	of	of	of	of	of
*and	and	and	and	and	and	and
to	to	to	to	to	to	to
*a	a	a	a	a	a	a
*in	in	in	in	in	in	in
*it	it	it	it	it	it	it
that	that	that	that	that	that	that
I	I	I	I	I	I	I
is	is	is	is	is	is	is
*for	for	for	for	for	for	for
be	be	be	be	be	be	be
was	was	was	was	was	was	was
you	you[1]	you	you	you	you	you
as	as	as	as	as	as	as
with	with	with	wyth	with	vvith	with
he	he	he	he	he	he	he
have	have	have	have	have	have	have
*on	on	on	on	on	on	on
by	bi	by	by	by	by	by
*not	not	not	not	not	not	not
*at	at	at	at	at	at	at
this	this	this	this	this	this	this
are	(ben)	are	are	are	are	are
we	we	we	we	we	vve	we
his	his	his	his	his	his	his
*but	but	but	but	but	but	but
they	thei	they	they	they	they	they
all	alle	all	all	all	al	all
*will	wole	will	will	wil	vvil	will
*or	or	or	or	or	or	or
which	whiche	which	which	which	vvhich	which
*from	fro	from	from	from	from	from
*had	hadde	had	had	had	had	had
(has	has	has	has	has	has	has)[2]
one	oon	one	one	one	one	one
our	our	oure	our	our	our	our
*an	an	an	an	an	an	an
been	ben	bene	bene	bene	been	been
my	my	my	my	my	my	my
there	there	there	there	there	there	there
no	no	no	no	no	no	no
their	hir	there	their	theyr	their	their
were	weren	were	were	were	were	were
so	so	so	so	so	so	so
*him	hym	him	him	him	him	him
your	[1]youre	youre	youre	your	your	your
*can	kan	can	can	can	can	can
would	wolde	wolde	wolde	would	would	would
*if	if	if	yf	if	if	if

*Alphabetically spelt.

[1]Wycliffe used the Old English form of y. [2]The form used was "hath" not "has".

Note to Plate 6 on Page 11
(cont.)

These very common words happen to be all of Middle English, and not of Latin, origin. Thirty-three of these words (those not marked with an asterisk) are not alphabetic: anyone seeking to read them is inevitably misled or thwarted, were he to interpret the characters as carrying their normal values (as in the seventeen remaining words). If the 100 commonest words be examined, the percentage of misleading words increases from 66 per cent to 77 per cent.

The conclusion to be drawn is that, even for those words which are of the greatest possible importance for success in the earliest stages of learning to read, the medium used by children of the twentieth century is still to-day that of a select few adolescents and adults of the sixteenth; and that its suitability (if any) for the purpose, and its aptness (if any) to the principles of pedagogy, were the accident of history and not the result of careful design.

Plate 7. The ten words of greatest relative frequency: in total occurring more than once in every four words in continuous English[1]

		Invariably in i.t.a.
THE The the *the* *the* *The*	6	ȶhe
OF of *of*	3	ov
AND And and ɑnd &	5	and
TO to *To*	3	tɷ
A a ɑ	3	a
IN In in *In* *In*	5	in
THAT That That that that *that* *That*	7	ȶhat
IT It it *It* *It* *if*	6	it
IS is *is* *Is* *Is* *Is* *Is*	7	iꞅ
I *I* *I*	3	ie
	48	10

This table of the ten commonest words shows the extent to which variation in pattern reduces the potential of Look-and-Say learning by reducing the opportunities for repetition and by substituting confusion for reinforcement. This explains how it came about that the Look-and-Say method of teaching, which is potentially most valuable, is frustrated—so largely and so unnecessarily!

[1] *Relative Frequency of English Speech Sounds.* Godfrey Dewey. Harvard University Press.

Plate 8. The six values attached to but one letter (with incidentally its three differing characters A, a, ɑ)

1.	an		an
2.	canyon	any, many	en
3.	fan, pant	swan, want	on
4.	Janet, platen	Jane, plate	æ
5.	pallid	pall	aul
6.	Halma	palm	ɑm

The extent to which the misuse of characters in more than one value is evident is here shown (cf. the use of the characters *o n e* in combination in *bone*, *done*, *gone*, *one*). This abuse of the alphabetic principle reduces the potential of phonic learning—in fact destroys its dependability and undermines the confidence of the learner.

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